

MARCH 23, 1978

FOCUS: KARL WALLENDAS

INTRO:

KARL WALLENDAS, THE INTERNATIONALLY FAMED HIGH WIRE ARTIST FELL TO HIS DEATH WEDNESDAY IN SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO. THE SEVENTY-THREE YEAR OLD HEAD OF THE RENOWNED FLYING WALLENDAS WAS WALKING A ROPE SUSPENDED MORE THAN TEN STORIES ABOVE THE GROUND BETWEEN TWO LUXURY HOTELS WHEN A GUST OF WIND SWEPT HIM OFF BALANCE AND HE PLUNGED TO HIS DEATH. VOA'S GARY EDQUIST HAS THIS PROFILE OF THE FAMOUS PERFORMER:

TEXT:

KARL WALLENDAS HAD SAID SEVERAL TIMES THAT HE WOULD PROBABLY DIE IN ONE OF HIS OWN STUNTS, AND HE TOLD A REPORTER RECENTLY THAT "MY DESTINY IS TO KEEP WALKING THE WIRE UNTIL THE GOOD LORD WANTS ME." FOR KARL WALLENDAS, LIFE WAS SHOW BUSINESS, AND AS HE SAID ONE TIME, "WITHOUT SHOW BUSINESS WE DON'T SURVIVE.

MISTER WALLENDAS WAS A NATURALIZED AMERICAN CITIZEN. HE WAS BORN IN 1905 IN MAGDEBURG, GERMANY, THE SON OF A CIRCUS PERFORMER, AND ALMOST FROM THE MOMENT HE COULD WALK, HE BEGAN HIS TRAINING ON THE TIGHTROPE. HE WORKED WITH HIS FATHER'S ACT UNTIL 1922 WHEN HE LEFT TO MAKE HIS OWN CAREER.

(OPT) IN 1927, WALLENDAS ACCEPTED AN OFFER TO GO TO HAVANA, CUBA FOR A YEAR, AND IT WAS THERE THAT THE FIRST WALLENDAS FAMILY WAS FORMED WITH KARL AND HIS WIFE AND BROTHER HERMANN AND ANOTHER MAN. AMERICAN CIRCUS OWNER JOHN RINGLING WAS IN CUBA AND DISCOVERED THE TALENTED HIGH WIRE ARTISTS, SO IN APRIL, 1928 THE GREAT WALLENDAS OPENED THE RINGLING BROTHERS BARNUM AND BAILY CIRCUS BEFORE A CAPACITY HOUSE IN MADISON SQUARE GARDEN. IT

WAS THERE THAT THE WALLENDAS STUNNED THE AUDIENCE WHEN THE FOUR OF THEM MADE A THREE LEVEL PYRAMID WITH THE USE OF BALANCING POLES AND A CHAIR. IT EARNED THEM A FIFTEEN MINUTE OVATION, AND BROUGHT REPEATED SELL-OUT CROWDS WHEREVER THEY TRAVELED. FOR THE NEXT EIGHTEEN YEARS, (END OPT) WALLENDAS AND OTHER MEMBERS OF HIS FAMILY PERFORMED AS PART OF THE RINGLING BROTHERS CIRCUS. IN 1947, WALLENDAS STARTED HIS OWN CIRCUS SHOW, BUT IT FAILED A YEAR LATER WHEN HE WENT BANKRUPT, AND SO HE RETURNED TO HIS FIRST LOVE, THE HIGH WIRE.

IT WAS AFTER HIS RETURN THAT HE BEGAN TO STAGE THE FAMOUS SEVEN-MAN PYRAMID. IT WAS A DREAM STUNT, AND ONE THAT HE HAD WORKED TOWARD ALL HIS LIFE. THE PYRAMID, AS IT WAS SIMPLY CALLED, WAS PERFORMED MORE THAN THIRTY METERS OFF THE GROUND, WITHOUT A NET. THIS WAS THE STUNT THAT BROUGHT KARL WALLENDAS AND HIS FAMILY BOTH FAME AND TRAGEDY. THERE WAS ALWAYS A SELLOUT CROWD WHEN THE SEVEN MAN PYRAMID WAS PERFORMED. ONCE, THEY PLAYED BEFORE SEVEN CONSECUTIVE SELLOUT CROWDS OF NINE-THOUSAND EACH IN ONE AMERICAN CITY (MADISON, WISCONSIN). BUT SUCCESS HAD ITS TERRIBLE PRICE. PERFORMING HIGH ABOVE THE CONCRETE FLOOR OF THE DETROIT, MICHIGAN, COLISEUM WITHOUT A NET IN JANUARY, 1962, THE PYRAMID COLLAPSED. WALLENDAS'S SON-IN-LAW AND NEPHEW WERE KILLED AND HIS OWN SON, MARIO, WAS LEFT PARALYZED. WALLENDAS, HIS BROTHER HERMANN AND HERMANN'S SON MANAGED TO GRAB THE WIRE AS THEY FELL AND SAVE THEIR OWN LIVES. KARL WALLENDAS WAS HURT IN THE ACCIDENT. HE WAS ADVISED TO HAVE SURGERY BUT REFUSED AND, TYPICAL OF HIS COURAGE AND DEDICATION, HE RETURNED TO THE ACT THE NEXT DAY AND COMPLETED THE FULL SEASON BEFORE ALLOWING SURGERY. (OPT) OTHER TRAGEDIES HAUNTED THE WALLENDAS FAMILY: WALLENDAS'S SISTER-IN-LAW WAS KILLED IN A FALL FROM THE HIGH WIRE, AND KARL WALLENDAS, HIMSELF, FELL

FROM THE WIRE IN 1972. THAT WAS WHEN HE WAS SIXTY-SEVEN YEARS OLD.  
(END OPT)

BUT FALLS, INCREASING AGE AND ILLNESS FAILED TO KEEP THE DARING WALLEND OFF THE HIGH WIRE. IN RECENT YEARS, HE WALKED ACROSS A WIRE STRETCHED HIGH ABOVE THE PLAYING FIELD DURING A BASEBALL GAME IN PHILADELPHIA, AND JUST LAST YEAR HE STROLLED IN A LEISURELY MANNER ACROSS ALONG A CABLE SEVENTEEN STORIES HIGH BETWEEN TWO HOTELS IN MIAMI BEACH, FLORIDA.

IN A NEWSPAPER INTERVIEW IN FEBRUARY, KARL WALLEND SAID ABOUT HIS HIGH WIRE PERFORMANCES, "OH YES, YOU DO IT FOR ENTERTAINMENT. BUT IN ONE WAY WE LIKE TO BE SOMEBODY. YOU KNOW, YOU HAVE TO FACE REALITY. YOU CAN GO ON AN AIRPLANE AND DIE.... BUT IF YOU DIE ON AN AIRPLANE, YOU MAY DIE A NONENTITY...WE ALL WANT TO ACHIEVE -- SOMETHING." KARL WALLEND, DEAD AT 73.

-0-

BML/RTD